

DiVanna on Meuwly (2002)

Meuwly, Olivier, *Liberté et société: Constant et Tocqueville face aux limites du libéralisme*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2002. Pp. 258. ISBN 2-600-00630-3

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The crisis of democratic liberalism in modern politics has led to the re-evaluation of old theorists of the liberal state, including non-obvious liberals such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, and heralds of modern liberalism such as Constant and Tocqueville. Meuwly's book is an attempt to show that the inherent contradictions of liberalism were already present in Constant and Tocqueville's theoretical works.

Unsurprising as this may seem, Meuwly himself claims no intention to bring new sources to our understanding of Constant and Tocqueville. Rather, he tries to show to what extent both thinkers were aware of the paradoxes of liberalism, and how they tried to address them in their work. Rejecting the rousseauian conception of state and adopting the constitutional and institutional mechanisms that regulate state and society while defending the rights of individuals and their separateness from the state, Constant and Tocqueville represent at once the apex of political liberalism in France and the characterization of its major potential and actual shortcomings.

Meuwly is uninterested in any matter historical or contextual in his analysis. Even to an intellectual background, he seems to be particularly indifferent. Readers may also feel that Meuwly does not explore some of his key concepts fully. Romanticism, for example, appears throughout the book without Meuwly ever offering a precise definition of what is being meant; this is particularly detrimental to his analysis of Constant, which seems to depend, to a large extent, on the association of romanticism with abstract principles of individualism and state.

In spite of lack of conceptual precision, Meuwly's book does offer a lucid analysis, often very well detailed, of the thought of Constant and Tocqueville, and of the Hegelian response to the concerns of liberalism. This is the most interesting aspect of the book, as Hegel's stance towards liberalism is still object of much debate. That Constant was not a naïve political economist who trusted commerce to lead to peace, and that Tocqueville was not just a Cassandra fretting over the possible dangers of liberalism are already well-known propositions. Nonetheless, Meuwly moves the debate forward, showing how, in being unable to compile a comprehensive project for a social, economic and political liberalism, Constant and Tocqueville shrewdly identified some of the most pressing challenges still unresolved for twenty-first-century liberalism.

In a review of this book published in the *Journal of Modern History* (n. 77, June 2005), Rosenblatt argued that the book is really about Meuwly's present-day political concerns. It is possible to criticise Meuwly for this stance. Indeed, many have seen modern concern with political thought as politically and morally problematic since Quentin Skinner's approach to the history of political thought became popular in the 1970s. I would suggest that in spite of his political concerns, Meuwly's book has value. While we have moved past Hegelian dialectic and need not offer an immediate alternative to liberalism because we can see its flaws, it does well to remind ourselves, nonetheless, of the long-standing, readily-identifiable flaws of a system which seems to encompass most of the globe. With a skilful and systematic approach, and evidently with a great deal of knowledge, Meuwly's book does just this.

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